

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 4-26-06) (Feathery Garden Creatures) © 2006

Today's column is for the birds. Spring brings cavorting, mating and nest-building birds. In our garden we have a young robin defending his territory from imagined predators. He's been bashing himself against our kitchen window and our front window. And, if that's not enough he's attacking the mirrors, windows, chrome and windshield of my husband's truck.

My husband thought he'd outsmart Mr. Robin by turning the mirrors in so the robin could no longer see his reflection. We watched the robin one Saturday morning for about thirty minutes. He would squeeze himself between the window and mirror and turn upside down to attack his reflection in the mirror and then swivel around to attack his reflection in the window. He'd slip off the edge of the mirror where he was perched attackingly and slide down between the mirror and the truck window. Next he'd fly up onto the hood of the truck and peck his way across the whole front window attacking his reflection in the chrome, pausing every few seconds to do battle with the bird reflected in the windshield. Finally, he'd end up on the other side of the truck perched on that mirror and would begin the whole routine again.

The poor robin must have thought there were thousands of usurpers for his territory. We're getting worried, because we haven't seen any other robins and no females. Will someone please send one of their extra female robins to our garden so poor Mr. Robin can have a mate and start building a nest and raising baby robins? Our poor truck is tired of being abused and we're worried the robin is going to knock himself silly.

We've been getting calls at the Extension Office about robins. One woman was very desperate and wanted to know if someone could come trap her robin and take it away. We had to tell her it was part of nature, but I don't think she liked that answer. Kitsap's local bird expert, Joan Carson, assured readers in a recent column that the bird mating behavior will soon die down when all the birds begin nesting. So we'll need to just be patient with these poor young, amorous robins.

It's also the time of year when our local Flickers start finding places to rap out their love sounds to serenade and attract a mate. Favorite rapping spots for Flickers are sides of houses, flashings on chimneys and metal downspouts; the louder the better. Along with the tapping and rapping (usually starting at daybreak or as early as 3:30 a.m. at our house), the Flickers have an unusual call that is quite noisy. It's amazing how a medium sized bird can make such a squawk. Luckily this behavior will die down soon too.

On a not so humorous note, we've been receiving calls about people with rat problems in their gardens. After asking a series of questions the callers always admit that they feed the birds. One downside to feeding birds is that other animals enjoy the food too. If you have rats visiting your bird feeder, you may need to quit feeding the birds for several weeks and sometimes even a few months.

The Cornell University website <http://www.birds.cornell.edu> has excellent information on thousands of bird species; along with information on how to feed birds, create a wildlife habitat in your garden and a myriad of topics on our feathery friends. Cornell recommends only putting out enough birdseed to be consumed in a day. Avoid sprinkling seed on the ground. Catchment trays can be installed on the feeders but should be emptied daily and sanitized regularly.

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